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# Cang Zhuo——Hide The Diamond in the Rough

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**Rochester Institute of Technology**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

School of American Crafts

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts,

Metal and Jewelry Design

Cang Zhuo——Hide The Diamond in the Rough

By Quan Zhang

7/3/2017

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## Abstract

When I started the conceptual process of my thesis, I asked myself, what is jewelry? Why do I choose jewelry as the form to express my concept? What do I want to express through the jewelry that I create? I looked back to Chinese culture for inspiration since that has been the biggest influence in my life. It has molded my mode of thinking, the way I live and how I create.

The original idea of “Hide A Diamond in the Rough” comes from the traditional Chinese philosophy about an attitude towards life called 藏拙 or Cang Zhuos. What does this theory really mean? First of all, it is humbleness. Secondly, it means to sheathe one’s sword instead of boasting about your talent. Still water runs deep, one never knows what lies under the smooth still surface. A person is clever not to show or reveal themselves. To hide does not mean to be afraid or evade, but to avoid unnecessary troubles and to preserve strength. It does not mean that one’s talent should be hidden forever, but to be found when the time is right.

Furthermore, it is also a reflection of me, myself, and how I see people. When saying ‘Hide a diamond in the rough’, “rough” refers to the camouflage individuals use to fit into societal standards. The essence of human nature is abundant, pure, and beautiful. Everyone is unique. Some people are accepted by the majority, while others are not. In order to be accepted, most people hide their real selves inside of an “ordinary” cocoon. Nevertheless, everyone is beautiful and special in his or her own way. I believe that

people should not judge others by their external appearance because you never know if they might be hiding a diamond inside.

In order to guide the audience through my concept, I intend to make a series of works in different sizes and functions. Each will have one thing in common, something hidden inside. Because of this feature, the audience needs to go through an exploratory process in order to have a full view and concept of my work. Similar to a treasure hunt, although it is not just about finding the hidden “diamond.” It is also about the idea of finding the “diamond” within yourself and in other people you encounter. Under the rough cover, there might be a diamond underneath, waiting to be found.

## Discussion of sources and research

The original definition of “藏拙 Cang Zhuo” has two meanings:

1. An attitude toward life, keeping a low profile, modestly staying silent about their talents or accomplishments.
2. Keeping one's weakness unexposed.

In conclusion, the main point is “To hide.” Whether to hide intentionally or subconsciously or because you are obligated by your position, the purpose is the same, self-protection.

The first meaning was inspired by Zhuangzi, ancient Chinese masterpiece from the late Warring States period. The Zhuangzi is one of the two foundational texts of Daoism, along with the Dao De Jing, which is generally considered the most important of all Daoist writings. Here is the chapter named “The Mountain Trees,”

Zhuangzi was walking on a mountain and he saw a great tree with huge branches and luxuriant foliage. A carpenter was taking a rest by its side, but he would not touch it. When asked about the reason, he said that it was of no use for anything. Zhuangzi then said to his disciples, “This tree, because its wood is good for nothing, survived in the lumbering.” Having left the mountain, the Master visited an old friend, who was glad to see him and ordered his servant to cook a goose. The servant asked, “One of our geese can cackle, and the other cannot - which of them shall I kill?” The host said, “Kill the one that cannot cackle.”

Next day, his disciples asked Zhuangzi, saying, “Yesterday the tree on the mountain (you said) would live out its years because of the uselessness of its wood, and now our host's goose has died because of its inability to cackle - which of these conditions, Master, would you prefer to be in?” Zhuangzi laughed and said, “(If I said that) I would prefer to be in a position between being fit to be useful and wanting that fitness, that would seem to be the right position, but it would not be so, for it would not put me beyond being involved in trouble; whereas one who takes his seat on the Dao and its Attributes, and there finds his ease and enjoyment, is not exposed to such a contingency. He is above the reach both of praise and of detraction; now he (mounts aloft) like a dragon, now he (keeps beneath) like a snake; he is transformed into the (changing) character of

the time, and is not willing to addict himself to any one thing; now in a high position and now in a low, he is in harmony with all his surroundings; he enjoys himself at ease with the Author of all things; he treats things as things, and is not a thing to them: where is his liability to be involved in trouble? This was the method of Shen Nong and Huang-Di. As to those who occupy themselves with the qualities of things, and with the teaching and practice of the human relations, it is not so with them. Union brings on separation; success, overthrow; sharp corners, the use of the file; honor, critical remarks; active exertion, failure; wisdom, scheming; inferiority, being despised: where is the possibility of unchangeableness in any of these conditions? Remember this, my disciples. Let your abode be here - in the Dao and its Attributes.”<sup>1</sup>

What I have learnt from this story is the necessity to find the right position in life, to bear oneself modestly. The modesty here does not only mean not to show off too aggressively, but also not to keep a low profile forever. It does not indicate that talent should be hidden indefinitely. To hide is to know the distinction between the priority and the unnecessary; to hide is to gather strength to be ready to at the right time. It is a wise way of keeping balance in the life.

In the following quote, Abraham Lincoln exemplifies a sense of humor. I can see this wisdom as a good analogy of Cang Zhuo,

At an editors' banquet held in 1856, Lincoln—not being a journalist—felt rather alienated. Addressing his audience, he compared himself to the ugly horseman. This fellow, while riding one day, happened upon a woman who curtly remarked, “Well, for land sake, you are the homeliest man I ever saw.” “Yes, madam, but I can’t help it,” he responded. “No, I suppose not,” she allowed, “but you might stay at home.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Laozi, Yue Song, and Arthur Waley. *Dao de jing*. (Beijing: Zhong guo she hui chu ban she, 2003). Chapter “The mountain trees”. \*Page number were not available due to the ebook format.

<sup>2</sup> “11 of Abe Lincoln's Favorite Stories.” Mental Floss. July 14, 2014. Accessed May 14, 2017. <http://mentalfloss.com/article/57794/11-abe-lincolns-favorite-stories>.

Lincoln understands this principle of knowing what to do and what not to do. He knows when he should keep silent and when he needs to stand out. His attitude towards living reflects the wise way of keeping balance in the life. It sounds easy, but it is actually hard to do. This is how Cang Zhuo appears in real life. He sheathes his talent in this case and gains the chance to gather his power. He becomes stronger in every respect, and seizes the opportunity at the right time to finally become a great president of the United States.

The second meaning of Cang Zhuo is keeping one's weakness unexposed. However, what I would like to express is more than that.

Let's come back to the original definition of the word Cang Zhuo. 藏 (Cang) in Chinese means hide. 拙 (Zhuo) originally means clumsy, awkwardness, or one's weakness. In my thesis, I would like to extend the meaning to interpret human nature. In Chinese, we have a phrase called "Da Zhi Ru Yu." It originally comes from a Chinese classic text "Tao Te Ching" and means that wisdom may appear in a shroud of foolishness:

Chapter 41: When the best students hear of the Tao, they try zealously to put it into practice. When average students hear of the Tao, it's sometimes here and sometimes gone. When the worst students hear of the Tao, they burst out laughing. Not laughing would make it. Unworthy to be called the Tao. So the ancient text says: The way that is bright seems dull. The way forward seems to lead back. The smooth way seems rough. The highest virtue seems a valley. The purest whiteness seems stained. Excessive virtue seems defective. Solid virtue seems inactive. Simplicity appears sullied. The great square has no corners. The great vessel takes long to fashion. The great note is soundless. The great image has no form. The Tao hides in namelessness. It is good at giving and perfecting.

Chapter 45: Great perfection seems flawed. Yet use will not diminish it. Great fullness seems empty. Yet use will not exhaust it. Great straightness seems bent. Great skill seems awkward. Great eloquence seems stilted. Movement overcomes



cold. Stillness overcomes the heat. Clear and calm. One can be a ruler of the realm.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 41 is mainly explaining what is Tao (signifying 'way', 'path', 'route', 'key' or sometimes more loosely 'doctrine' or 'principle'). In the text, Lao Tzu lists a series of contradictory things on both sides, to show the relationship between phenomena and essence. They are different from each other, in opposition to each other, but interdependent at the same time. This relates to my thesis concept by repeating the ideology that keeping yourself hidden and knowing when to reveal are forces that should be kept in a balanced state. Neither can be omitted because both aspects depend on each other for success.

Chapter 45 is the continuation of Chapter 41, discussing content and form, the dialectical relationship between essence and phenomenon. Compared to Chapter 41, Chapter 45 is more relatable to human dignity. According to the text, a perfect personality should not necessarily reveal itself on the outside form. It is prudent to keep your true powers hidden on the inside. This ideology is what I wish to convey through my thesis, we should not judge each other by our outward shells. In society only a fraction of individuals will be considered outstanding. As a human being, none of us are perfect. We all have weaknesses, some more, some less. Some are showing on the outside, some are hiding on the inside. In today's culture, people are used to judging others by their appearance; the tattoos on their body, clothes they wear or piercings they

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<sup>3</sup> Laozi, and William Scott Wilson. *Tao te ching: an all-new translation*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2013), Chapter 41, Chapter 45. \*Page number were not available due to the ebook format.

have, even the cars they drive, ethnic backgrounds or choice of employment, education, etc, the list is endless. Looks can be deceiving so if you are quick to judge you will never know how beautiful a person truly is until you take the time to get to know them. Just like Theodore Roosevelt said, “There are good men and bad men of all nationalities, creeds, and colors; and if this world of ours is ever to become what we hope some day it may become, it must be by the general recognition that the man's heart and soul, the man's worth and actions, determine his standing.”<sup>4</sup>

I believe that everyone has a beautiful side, but some of them are hidden. To find the beautiful side of people is like treasure finding, all we need is just a little bit more patience.

Going back to the phrase Da Zhi Ruo Yu, it is describing a kind of person that has great wisdom (not necessarily referring to knowledge, but a particular talent) but outwardly no-one can tell by their appearance. In English, there is a proverb of Latin origin that has the same meaning with Da Zhi Ruo Yu called “still water runs deep,” now commonly taken to mean a quiet or stiff person may be very profound, or a man of great wisdom appears slow-witted because he takes time and care to react. This kind of hiding, just like a diamond in the rough, means the treasure is subjective existence, but passive hiding under a rough cover. Sometimes what you see is not always true, at least not comprehensively. Someone that has hidden exceptional characteristics or further potential, but lacks the final touches that would make them truly stand out from the crowd, would you give them the chance? Everyone is the diamond, some are shining and

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<sup>4</sup> "Theodore Roosevelt Quote." A-Z Quotes. <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/1057475>.

are cherished, some are hidden in the rough waiting to be found. Beauty is found everywhere. Our eyes do not show a lack of sense of beauty, but a lack of observation. I created my pieces to represent the diamonds in the rough. Only those who have the patience and care to observe will find the hidden diamonds.

### **Critical analysis**

From what has been discussed above, I have made a conclusion and created a series of work that could express my concept appropriately. I decided to make pieces that have different functions and put them into three different categories, body jewelry, wearable/interactive jewelry and sculpture. But they all have one thing in common, something is hidden inside. The hidden beauty is not limited to “Diamonds.” It could be anything that has the opposite quality to the outside form. For example, colorful and dull; pointed and smooth; hard and soft, etc.

### **Body Jewelry**

Jewelry, is an art form that is defined by the interaction with the body. It is without a doubt the best medium to convey my concept. Thus, the body jewelry is the first form I chose to start with. The forms of expression in my thesis involve hiding and finding, and the form of conception is considered a way of protection to prevent unnecessary trouble. The general idea is to create a body piece/armor that has multiple layers of different materials. The outside aesthetic could make the wearer blend in with the surroundings and become unnoticed. In opposition, the inside would give the

audience a feeling of reward once they find the hidden beauty. In conclusion, the body pieces would show the self-protection of people while secretly displaying their inner beauty.

The self-protection is a popular choice by those who are different from a majority, but why? Aristotle said:

Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of people despise those differences, and their disdain springs from fear. Their fear spawns from ignorance. Because of that, most of the people don't like standing out from the crowd. Hiding our differences from others in order to fit into the majority group is a popular choice. However, I do not think that is the healthiest way to solve the problems of human interaction. Being different is not a bad thing. The message I want to deliver through my work is to encourage people to seek out and understand the distinctiveness between humans, and embrace our differences in order to find the beauty hidden in us all. Difference should not be considered as dangerous, it should be celebrated as beautiful.

Derived from the concept, I have designed three pieces of body jewelry. I chose steel wire as the material to build the strong frame structure as a shell to protect the wearer. The steel wires are welded together to create a hollow wire body structure with

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<sup>5</sup> "A quote from Politics." Goodreads.

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/183896-man-is-by-nature-a-social-animal-an-individual-who>.

multiple layers, and colored stone texture spray paint. The spray paint provides texture which gives the piece a rough look. Then I used different materials to fill the space between steel wires to create layers. The materials include semi-transparent white and black fabric, and dry paper pulp with texture spray paint. In order to show the hidden differences inside, I chose to use not only the “appealing” materials, but also the “unattractive” ones.



(1)



(2)



(3)

In the first piece (Fig. 1,2, 3), I wanted the wearer to feel safe under its protection while adorning it. Thus I built up a strong frame with steel wires that is partly covered by semi-transparent white netting fabric. I choose semitransparent silver silk to fill the inside layers, and randomly sewed on glass flowers to represent the fragile beauty inside. While observing from a distance, the wearer blends in with the surroundings and becomes unnoticed. The hidden beauty details can only be found if the audience walks closer to observe the piece.

The second piece (Fig.4, 5), I wanted to emote the kind of person that hides all the sharp parts of their character in order to integrate into society. Thus, in this head piece I used two kinds of thick semi-transparent black fabric to fill the space between the wire structures. I chose the thicker fabric in order to build a strong outside form. The



(4)



(5)

sharpness inside is created by pointed rivets with different heights. They represent the sharp parts of their character that are hidden inside the cover.



(6)



(7)



(8)

The last body jewelry (Fig. 6, 7, 8) is an analogy of people who are tough on the outside, but soft on the inside. I chose to use a different material rather than the fabric that I used before, paper pulp. The paper pulp is a very interesting material. It's made out of soft paper, but it will become very hard after drying out. Once the paper hardens, the texture feels like the rock. I started the piece by using colorful woolen yarn twined around the wires to create colorful surfaces inside. I utilized these beginning surfaces to build and grow a rough shell of paper pulp. After the paper pulp shell dries out, I colored it with texture spray in different shades of gray to make it look like rocks. It creates the roughness and the hardness of the rock. However, it is not a real rock. The essence is still paper, a delicate material which is easily peeled off and lightweight. When the audience comes closer to see the piece and touches the hard shell, they will find not only the toughness outside, but also something soft and colorful hiding inside.

### **Wearable Jewelry/ Interactive Jewelry**

In addition to the body jewelry series, I have made 17 pieces of wearable jewelry to support my thesis. Jewelry is meant to be worn. Some people wear jewelry for decoration. Some wear jewelry for protection. Some use jewelry as a precious thing to remember a special moment. "Jewelry can decorate. It can flatter, attract and seduce, stimulate memories and delight. But it can also warm, provoke and make you think. Jewelry, then, is a very versatile medium of human expression."<sup>6</sup> However, my jewelry is designed to be unattractive at first sight. All the wearable jewelry pieces I made are based

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<sup>6</sup> Holder, Elisabeth. *Jewelry is more than decoration*. "Pretty Sharp", Arnoldsche, 2002, Germany.



on one common idea, hiding something in a different way. While wearing these pieces, the viewer would not be amazed at the first glance until they come closer to find out the details and the hidden beauty. That is how I applied “Cang Zhuo” in the jewelry form — the attractive does not come from the appearance, but the hidden details, the beauty inside.

I chose to use paper clay and paper pulp as the primary materials to convey the “hidden” idea. It is because both of them are easy to shape before they dry out. After drying out, they are strong, easy to color and texturize. The most important characteristic is that they are lightweight, which allowed me to create larger wearable pieces.



(9)



(10)

The main piece (Fig.9,10) is a sizable necklace that is composed of multiple metal parts and a few glass pieces. First I created the metal base and frame, riveted copper and silver bowls onto the metal base, and then covered the outside of the frame with netting fabric to support a boundary. Next, I laid a few layers of paper clay and after the paper clay dried out, I painted it with different shades of gray acrylic pigment and sprayed rock



texture on it. I cold connected all of the parts together with steel jump rings in the end. This piece is the first jewelry piece I made for my thesis, it was hard when I started because I hadn't made jewelry like this before. It took me a while to figure out what materials would fit the best and how to combine other materials with metal to create a finished piece.

After I finished the first piece, I had some knowledge about how I could work the paper clay with the metal to achieve the desired result. I continued the experiment by combining the paper clay with druzy, glass and silver tubing to create other pieces.

I chose different materials to fit various situations based on their characteristics, for example: their color, weight, and texture, etc. to explore other ideas of hiding.



(11)



(12)

First, hiding transparency in transparency (Fig.11,12), is inspired by how protective coloration enables animals to blend with their surroundings and therefore evade danger. The purpose of this way of hiding is to self-protect, which is also the main purpose of Cang Zhuo .



(13)



(14)

Second, hiding something precious in a rough cover (Fig 9,13,14), is the overall appearance of Cang Zhuo.



(15)



(16)



(17)

Third, is hiding gemstones in an unusual setting (Fig 15, 16, 17). These designs allow viewer to experience the finding process in order to understand my concept about finding the beauty hidden in us all. The audience has to walk closer to the piece and look within them and all around, from top to bottom, in order to find the hidden gemstone. The interaction gives them a better understanding of my concept.



(18)



(19)



(20)

In addition, during my process of creating work, I found that the function of the jewelry pieces, the position on the body and the way in which they are worn can be designed to denote my concept. Therefore I made 7 conceptual/interactive jewelry pieces to further develop my concept. These pieces can only represent the idea when it is worn on the body, for example, the double-sided necklace (Fig 18, 19) is a necklace with 2 pendants, one can be worn in the front, while the other in the back of the neck. The position of the pendent can be changed to show the treasure in different places of the body by adjusting the length of the necklace.

The metal flowers of the glass ring are hiding in the palm in opposition to the normal way of wearing a ring. (Fig 20) By this design, the metal flower is protected in the palm.



(21)



(22)



(23)



(24)

These two rings (Fig 21,23), challenge the traditional way of wearing jewelry. For the first ring, (Fig. 21, 22) the gold treasure is hidden while it is worn on the finger, the unattractive rock above is the camouflage to prevent one from coveting the treasure. For the second ring (Fig 23, 24), the sharpness of the glass is hiding in the palm under the harmless camouflage.

### **Sculpture/Installation**

Other than jewelry, I also created 3 sculpture pieces (Fig. 25, 26, 27) to enrich my body of work. Compared to the jewelry, sculpture has less limitation, more possibilities to convey my idea of “Cang Zhuo”.



(25)

The glass sculpture (Fig. 25) is inspired by sea anemones. Transparent sea anemones appear different colors because of the effect of the surroundings. The weaker sea creatures like to use sea anemones as their camouflage to protect themselves. I blew a hollow glass egg and partly covered it with paperclay. The glass egg is removable and is designed to be a container of hidden treasure. The reflection of the mirror base combines the virtuality and reality of its surroundings and creates a complicated environment to better hide the treasure.



(Fig. 26) The wire sculpture is a brief summary of the body jewelry, the glass part inside represents all kinds of hidden treasure I have mentioned above.

(26)





(27)

Figure 27 is the last sculpture made of two fragile materials — glass and paperclay. This piece represents the fragile part of ourselves which is normally protected and hiding inside. I asked the model to hold the piece like this to show a movement of giving and bring a question to the audience: if one day someone opens his/her heart to you and shows his/her weakness, will you accept and cherish it, or will you drop it?

### **Display of the work**

How I display my Body jewelry, wearable conceptual jewelry and sculpture to convey the idea of “Cang Zhuo” clearly to the audience is of utmost importance. After

careful consideration, I decided to group all my works by the function of the pieces, the color/size of the pieces and the choice of materials. For the body jewelry, I decided to hang them up from the ceiling instead of putting them on the mannequin. While hanging in the air, both the inside and the outside of the piece can be observed.

Most of wearable jewelry were sewn onto round paper pulp plates and fastened to the wall in different heights. The height of the pieces depends on how I wanted the audience to find the hidden parts. For example, I placed the paper-clay earrings at a lower height and the



(28)



(29)



(30)

necklace at a higher height because they have gemstones set on top/bottom of the silver tube (Fig 28, 29, 30). This allows the audience to see the top/bottom view of the pieces in order to find the stone.

However, the conceptual jewelry is hard to represent the idea without photos. To solve the problem, I used a computer to play the slideshow of all the models wearing the

work, which is essential to helping the audience fully understand my concept behind the design.(Fig 31, 32, 33)



(31)



(32)



(33)



## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I have successfully presented my thesis concept within the pieces I made. Although they are made out of different materials and have different functions, in different scales, they all present the same theme.

During my thesis show, every time I explained the concept to the audience and lead them to find the hidden part, I felt satisfied. I was happy to see people's surprise after finding the hidden treasure, and wondering about the underlying concept enough to ask me questions.

My thesis show consists of multiple aspects, not only the concept and the body of work, but also the way it was installed, the audience participation, and my interpretation. Each aspect is necessary to fuel the next. I learned a lot from this experience, and was able to explore my thesis from a fuzzy concept to 20 completed pieces of different functionalities. The most important thing I have learned through the thesis-making process is never be afraid to try new materials. Always keep an open mind to the new and versatile mediums. I have never used paper clay or paper pulp as a jewelry material before my thesis and I never thought it would become the primary material. Another important idea I got from the process is that you do not have to be limited to the idea of Jewelry only representing accessories. It is an art form; it is wearable sculpture; it is a carrier of concepts. When I jumped out of the box and started to explore all the different possibilities, my eyes were opened wide. I owe great thanks to my thesis committee professors for halting me from making only everyday wearable jewelry. They pushed me

to explore more possibilities in different scales and different mediums. Without their guidance, I would not have had the chance to go so far. After the thesis show, I applied for many exhibitions and awards, and some of my works were accepted by different faculties and also runway shows. This has been a truly rewarding experience for all my effort and hard work. I would like to keep exploring my thesis after I graduate, and continue to establish my own style.

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